Worrying implications for vulnerable children as emotional burnout among foster carers is found to be at very high levels, says new report

The report, ‘No-one told us it was going to be like this’, is the result of a national survey and interviews with foster carers, carried out by the University of Bristol’s Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies.

It exposes serious levels of burnout and secondary traumatic stress among foster carers, and a deep dissatisfaction with the support currently provided. In submitting their findings to the Government’s Fostering Inquiry, the researchers and study participants hope more relevant and targeted support will be made available.

An overwhelming majority (77 per cent) of the 546 foster carers surveyed had some symptoms of compassion fatigue. “Compassion fatigue can potentially lead to children in care becoming even more traumatised,” warned lead researcher Dr Heather Ottaway. “Foster carers who were affected reported only being able to meet children’s basic needs, and could not meet their often considerable emotional needs. In the worst case scenario, carers either ended placements or gave up fostering altogether.”

“If we dare talk about it we’re seen as failing – only we’re not failing, we just need a bit of help.” After ten years and a total of 40 children, Daisy found herself just about capable of meeting the daily demands of life as a foster carer. But it wasn’t until a fellow carer used the words ‘compassion fatigue’ and indicated that there was help available that Daisy was able to access better and more appropriate support.

Daisy (not her real name) is one of 546 foster carers who took part in a national study which has revealed the widespread and damaging impact of compassion fatigue on carers and children.

Participants reported feeling deeply dissatisfied because social workers were not adequately trained to recognise or intervene where children were impacted by trauma, nor when burnout and secondary traumatic stress developed in foster carers. In submitting their findings to the Government’s Fostering Inquiry, the authors of the study and its funders, Fostering Attachments Ltd, hope more effective training and support will be made available from fostering agencies.

“There used to be more support in the beginning but a lack of funding, among other things, means there’s a flow of social workers these days who don’t get to know you. It’s not their fault, it’s the way the system works,” said Daisy, who like other participants, described feeling judged by social workers who lacked an understanding of the effects of trauma on children and the demanding reality of caring for them.

Daisy ultimately found help via the study’s funders, Fostering Attachments Ltd, part of the Inspire Training Group, which specialises in therapeutic parenting and childhood trauma.

Lead researcher Dr Heather Ottaway said a more consistent fee structure could significantly help to alleviate the pressures on foster carers. Foster carers are paid an allowance to cover the cost of the child in their care and a fee based on their skill level and time. Payments vary between local authorities, although the average weekly sum can range between £150 and £500, depending on the needs of the child.

In 2015, there were 44,625 foster carers in the UK, caring for 51,850 children, according to the latest figures from Ofsted. However, the Fostering Network estimates that there remains a shortfall of 7,600 fostering families – a shortfall which could be met if agencies were more realistic in their advertising, preparation, training and support of carers, say researchers.
Other recommendations in the report include ensuring social workers have a good knowledge of the impact of trauma on children and those who care for them, and knowledge of the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue in order to identify foster carers who are suffering, and provide the support they need. The report also suggests locally-based and independently run support groups are commissioned; and that greater investment goes into respite provision.

“This research uniquely demonstrates the serious cost to foster carers of the role they take on,” said Dr John Simmonds OBE, Director of Policy, Research and Development at CoramBAAF. “The role of the foster carer could not be more important. They are the lifeblood for the child 24/7.”

Notes to Editors:

The research summary and full report are available via http://tinyurl.com/gn34fjb.

The Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies, based in the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol, aims to promote best practice in the field of adoption, foster care and placement with kin by linking research, practice and training in order to provide these children with stable and predictable family experiences.

Dr Heather Ottaway and ‘Daisy’ are available for interview via the University of Bristol press office. Contact Aliya Mughal on 0117 928 8086 or Aliya.Mughal@bristol.ac.uk

Sarah Naish MD of Fostering Attachments Ltd is available for interview on 07534953147 or email sarah@fosteringattachments.co.uk